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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000045

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TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KNNP](#) [KPLS](#)
SUBJECT: PROFESSOR DISCUSSES DETAINED AMERICANS, NUCLEAR DISCUSSIONS,
AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAN

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence
Office, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S) Summary: A political science professor from Tehran who met with IRPOffs June 21 predicted that detained Iranian-American scholar Haleh Esfandiari would be released within a week or two, with bail. The professor did not speak on any authority but made the prediction based on how past cases were handled. The contact also predicted that the Iranian government would concede and accept suspension of enrichment - which they would see as surrender - by January or February 2008, and that by then the incentives package offered by the P5+1 would be off the table and Iran would get nothing in return. He claimed that Deputy National Security Council Secretary Vaidi had told him, when he shared this prediction with him, not to put money on it. The professor also confirmed that the government crackdown on academia and civil society is having a marked chilling effect on the intellectual sector of society, and that fewer people are willing to risk attending conferences in foreign countries. The contact also said that Voice of America television is widely viewed in Iran and he regards it as credible and balanced, although Iranians assume that any program guests have the backing of the US government. End Summary.

Detained Americans

2.(S) A political science professor who knows detained Iranian-American scholar Haleh Esfandiari predicted that she and the other detained Iranian-Americans would be released within a week or two, with bail. He made clear he did not speak on any authority but made the prediction based on how past cases were handled, including Iranian-Canadian academic Ramin Jahanbegloo. The contact saw as a good sign the recent statement by an Iranian official that while the detainees had admitted to wrongdoing, they were working for good. This, the professor said, could serve as a justification the government could give for their release. He expressed disappointment that there was no avenue for him and others to lobby for their release. All of the scholars who spoke at the Woodrow Wilson Center are nervous now, the contact said, adding that one of them he knew had been interrogated recently. The professor said he himself was questioned in 2005 after going to a Track II conference in Athens and that many of the questions were about Haleh

Esfandiari. Based on this, he said, he had warned Esfandiari not to go to Iran. (Note: A former deputy minister under President Khatami also predicted these detainees would be released soon, saying Iran realizes it is not getting anything for their detention and that Esfandiari's published works makes clear her neutral stance on US-Iran issues. End note.)

Nuclear discussions and sanctions

3.(S) The professor also discussed the nuclear negotiations, predicting that the government would concede and accept suspension of enrichment - which they would see as surrender - by January or February 2008, and that by then the incentives package offered by the P5+1 would be off the table, and Iran would get nothing in return. The contact claimed, however, to have shared his prediction with Deputy National Security Council Secretary Vaidi who told him not to put money on it. He said Vaidi told him - without explaining - that there was more to the issue than the nuclear issue. The professor also repeated an Iranian government claim that even temporarily stopping the centrifuges from spinning would damage them.

4.(S) According to the professor, former nuclear negotiator Hossein Mousavian was released due to the intervention of Expediency Council chair Rafsanjani. The contact, who claimed to know Mousavian from his association with the Expediency Council's Center for Strategic Research where Mousavian is the deputy, opined that the arrest was a warning to Mousavian to stop criticizing the president's administration in public. He said Mousavian thought Iran should have accepted the P5+1 incentives package, and along with some others on the left, supports suspension. (Note: other contacts have also said there is a faction in Iranian circles, including Rafsanjani, that support suspension. End note.)

5.(C) The contact opined that sanctions are hurting the economy, citing rumors that Iran has lost \$200 billion in

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foreign investment to Dubai. (Note: The contact recounted a popular joke about rationing: A man asked a Nigerian, "What is your opinion about the rationing of chicken?" The Nigerian replies, "What is a chicken?" He asks a Swiss man the same question. The Swiss man replies, "What is rationing?" He asks an Iranian the same question, and the Iranian replies, "What is an opinion?" End note.)

Important regime figures, corruption

6.(C) Asked about where President Ahmadi-Nejad ranks on the list of most important people in the Iranian government, the contact placed him in the top five. The most important person is Supreme Leader Khamenei, he said; then Expediency Council chair Rafsanjani, Guardian Council chair Jannati, Assembly of Experts chair Meshkini, President Ahmadi-Nejad, IRGC commander Safavi, Judiciary chief Shahrudi, and Islamic Coalition Party head Asgaroladi.

7.(S) On the topic of corruption, the contact said that though Iranians view Rafsanjani and his family as corrupt because they use connections and access to amass personal wealth, President Ahmadi-Nejad reportedly taking 350 million tomans (approx. USD 337,000) from the Tehran municipality for his presidential campaign is not seen as corruption because it was not for personal use. In contrast to Rafsanjani's sons, the Supreme Leader's sons stay out of business and therefore are not regarded as corrupt. Asked about the Supreme Leader's son Mojtaba, the contact said he has some behind-the-scenes power and is said to be link to the paramilitary group Ansar-e Hizballah. The contact also said that the Supreme Leader's office has 2-3 billion dollars per year to dispense, including to other countries. Asked about Iranian public opinion of its government's actions in Iraq, the contact said that people resent the fact that Iran sends money to Iraq and to Palestinian

groups that is needed at home.

Civil society and polling

8.(C) The professor said that the crackdown on civil society and the arrests of Iranian-American scholars have had a chilling effect on the academic and NGO community in Iran. Scholars who attend conferences in foreign countries are regularly interrogated or even arrested upon their return, he said. (Note: While the professor acknowledged that government intimidation of civil society has been quite effective, he still plans to travel to the US for a conference in July. End note.)

9.(C) In the case of Ayatollah Boroujerdi, the dissident cleric who was arrested in 2006 along with several of his followers, the contact said he has seen rumors in the press that Boroujerdi had received the death penalty by the religious court, but he said it would be very unusual for the government to carry out such a sentence against a cleric. He said that even in cases of non-clerics accused of apostasy, such as scholar Hashem Aghajari, the death sentence was overturned and he was released.

10.(S) The contact claimed that several NGOs are actually run by the Intelligence Ministry (MOIS). For example, he said it was widely known in the academic and NGO community that the Research Institute for Strategic Studies is affiliated with MOIS, even though it claims to be affiliated with the Education Ministry. The contact said that MOIS conducts public opinion polls through NGO cut-outs. According to him, the most reliable polls are conducted by MOIS, but the results are never released to the public. In general, he said, polling in Iran is unreliable. Iranians tend to be wary of pollsters because they are never sure to whom they are speaking.

Elections and voting, Voice of America

11.(S) Asked his opinion about prospects for the 2008 Majles elections, the professor said he does not expect much change. He predicted that the Guardian Council will again disqualify many reformist candidates. The professor allowed, however that more centrist-rightists could predominate in next elections. The contact criticized voting procedures in Iran as ripe for abuse, saying there are no voting districts or voter's registration. Iranians simply present their identity card at

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any polling station anywhere in the country in order to vote. Iranians can even vote for Majles representatives in districts where they do not reside. (Note: another contact who reportedly worked in the past on the staff of the Guardian Council claimed that there are 90 million national identity cards in a country with a population of 70 million, inferring the potential for massive fraud. End note.)

12.(C) The professor added that voting for the five designated religious minority Majles representatives is nominally limited to members of the respective religious minorities, but since religion is not indicated on the national identity card, it can be difficult to enforce. The polling stations for those five elections are generally centers of worship, or community centers belonging to the designated religious minorities. The contact added that during the Khatami presidency, religious minorities petitioned to be issued separate identity cards that indicated religion. This was reportedly in order to protect them being punished for violating restrictions placed on Muslims, but not non-Muslims; for example, possession of alcohol.

13.(C) Regarding Voice of America broadcasts, the professor claimed that VOA programs are widely viewed and that he hears all different kinds of people talking about them. The professor regards VOA programming as generally credible and balanced, although he conceded that Iranians tend to believe that whoever is a guest on VOA programs is supported by the US government.

For example, he said, when Reza Pahlavi was on VOA and was referred to as the "prince," Iranians assumed that the USG supports the monarchist cause; then, when a nationalist is featured on the program, people assume the USG supports Iranian nationalists.

14.(S) Comment: We would assess this political science professor, known for several years, as a generally reliable contact, although his direct contact with influential actors in Iran is unknown. In addition to his academic work, he is involved in civil society, particularly on women's issues. He is not a general advocate of US-Iran engagement, expressing fear in a previous meeting that if Iran reaches a nuclear deal with the US, the US would turn its back on human rights in Iran. IRPoffs assured him that even if the international community reaches an agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue, the US would maintain its emphasis on the rights of the Iranian people.
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